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ABSTRACT

Political scientists have long been concerned with public opinion towards politics and political participation. Despite the plethora of studies concerning opinion and behavior, there have been few systematic efforts undertaken to examine how political science courses affect students' opinions and political behavior. In this paper, some personal experiences of political science instructors at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) are described. This paper examines two distinct questions: (1) how particular approaches to classroom activities have been influenced by the campus environment and by characteristics of the student body; and (2) what impact the introductory political science course has had on several variables traditionally used to predict political participation, including individual levels of political interest, political alienation, cynicism towards politics, and knowledge of basic political facts. It is reported that introductory political science courses positively affect students' opinions towards politics, and thus increase their propensity towards future civic participation. (Contains 6 figures and 3 tables of data.) (Author/BT)

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Connections in the Classroom:
Teaching 101 in an Urban Environment

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Abstract

Political scientists have long been concerned with public opinion towards politics and political participation. Despite the plethora of studies concerning opinion and behavior, there have been few systematic efforts undertaken to examine how political science courses affect students' opinions and political behavior. In this paper, we describe our own experiences as instructors of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). In our paper, we examine two distinct questions. First, we explore how our approaches to classroom activities have been influenced by the campus environment and by characteristics of the student body. Secondly, we explore the impact our introductory course in political science has had on several variables traditionally used to predict political participation, including individual levels of political interest, political alienation, cynicism towards politics, and knowledge of basic political facts. We report that our course appears to positively affect students' opinions toward politics and thus increases their propensity toward future civic participation.

Introduction:

Political scientists have long been concerned with public opinion towards politics and political participation. This concern has been expressed generally through measurement of public opinion and political behavior, and the impact of election cycles or public policy debates. Despite the plethora of studies concerning opinion and behavior, however, there have been few systematic efforts undertaken to examine how political science courses affect students' opinions and political behavior. This lack of attention continues despite the fact that college political science courses increasingly represent the lion's share of civic education received by this nation's youngest voting-eligible residents (Mann, 1996).

College political science instructors are responsible for teaching young people about the basic institutions of government, about political processes and actors, about how to understand and interpret political media, as well as about the basic foundations of American political thought and political history. By providing students with basic information and an environment in which to share ideas and explore important questions about American politics, college political science courses help socialize students. Political science courses may thus provide a useful arena to promote civic participation, increase political knowledge, and address political alienation. Whether or not this is the goal of political science instructors, we should be aware of the impact our courses have on these variables as well as what can be done to increase or decrease the impact.

Considering the responsibility borne by college course instructors, one would expect a plethora of studies concerning the effects of political science teaching on students' political opinions and behaviors. Instead, the majority of articles that discuss political science courses focus on the impact of different pedagogical approaches on student learning. Most of these studies take the form of case studies that while valuable in many ways, may not be

generalized to all colleges and universities. Further, few of the articles we have seen make any attempt to substantiate findings with empirical data concerning student opinions or behaviors toward politics. Rather, the empirical data is more often used to substantiate the success of the teaching methods discussed in the article. We have found it especially difficult to apply lessons explained in pedagogical studies to our own classrooms, in large part because the environment in which we teach seems so different from those described in the journal articles.

In this paper, we describe our own experiences as instructors of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). In our paper, we examine two distinct questions. First, we explore how our approaches to classroom activities have been influenced by the campus environment and by characteristics of the student body. Working at a commuter campus serving a highly diverse student population, UIC instructors must make accommodations to meet the special needs of our students. We describe some of the special needs of our students as well as some of the strategies we have developed to cope meet them.

Secondly, we explore the impact our introductory course in political science has had on several variables traditionally used to predict political participation, including individual levels of political interest, political alienation, cynicism towards politics, and knowledge of basic political facts. We report that our course appears to positively affect students' opinions toward politics and thus increases their propensity toward future civic participation. Our data are drawn from systematic surveys collected in several sections of our course, at the beginning and end of one 15-week semester. We collected this data in hopes of developing a model for analyzing the impact of our course as well as to develop a database useful for analyzing trends in student political opinion. Based on our initial success, we feel strongly

that greater efforts should be taken to empirically analyze the impact of political science courses on political attitudes and behavior, and to connect changes in opinions and attitudes with effective teaching strategies.

Section I: The Students at the University of Illinois at Chicago

At the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, it is an accepted part of UIC's mission to provide educational opportunities for students who wish to remain in the Chicagoland area. The university also recognizes that "among (undergraduate students) are many for whom a university education is not a long-standing family tradition and who must surmount economic, social, and educational barriers to achieve academic success (UIC, 1995)." Originally chartered to service working Chicago students, UIC has evolved gradually into a Research I university whose students are likely to attend full-time and to view undergraduate education as their primary occupation. Still, a large portion of the student body maintains significant responsibilities off campus and may view their classroom responsibilities as but one of their many primary activities.

UIC started as a commuter campus located along Chicago's lakefront and is now strategically located at the nexus of three major interstate highways. Most students at UIC still commute many travelling long distances to reach class. In our 101 classes, 86% of the students lived off campus and 49% traveled each day over 10 miles each way to reach campus. This can translate into one-way commutes of over an hour or more each day, a significant burden for any person let alone a college student attending classes. Students who arrived late because of a traffic jam lost valuable classroom time, missed assignments or announcements, and caused significant disruptions to the classroom environment. Students using public transportation may have had slightly shorter distances, but when travelling such

long distances, those commutes would have still been close to or longer than one hour each way. Though we lack the data, we feel that there student commuting and missed classes, high rates of daily tardiness, and other forms of classroom disruption were correlated.

The impact of long commute times may be seen most clearly in the differences in failure rates for three different sections, each taught by the same instructor using the same materials, but scheduled at distinctly different times of the morning. Students enrolled in classes scheduled during peak rush hours failed the class far more regularly than did students taking the course in the late morning. The failure rates for the 8 and 9 am sections were 21.9% and 17.9% respectively. The failure rate for the 11 a.m. section was much lower, only 11.7%. Attendance and attentiveness are both factors affecting the success rate of students, and both of these factors are negatively influenced by the high number of students commuting each day through rush-hour traffic.

In addition to long commutes, our students are also very likely to have other significant commitments outside of class. Over half of the students in our 101 classes were employed off-campus at least 10 hours a week, while 23% were employed more than 20 hours a week and 4% more than 30 hours per week. Perhaps reflecting students' outside work responsibilities, only 40% of our students had scheduled a full course load, which at UIC equals four classes or 12 credit hours. This is significantly lower than the national average of 59% as reported by the Department of Education (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1997). An additional 40% of our students were scheduled for only three courses, while the schedule of the rest could not be determined. In addition, among students in our political science class, just over 10% were married and slightly more than 30% claimed to have primary responsibility for children in their households. Based on these data, it is no wonder that when we asked students to name their occupation, we found that less than 60%

of our students classified their primary occupation as students, while 26% named altogether another occupation.

Students' external commitments challenges the instructor at UIC not simply to teach the material, but also to motivate students to come to class and to make sure that the class competes effectively with other student commitments. A student who works 20 hours a week and is taking three other classes needs to be reassured frequently that the 101 course has value. This same requirement may not hold true for a student who lives in a dorm, does not work off campus, and views being a student as his or her primary responsibility. Because so many students in our classes commute and maintain significant outside commitments, instructors consistently encounter and must overcome classroom distractions and lost instruction time. Often this involves making choices between providing make-ups or simply failing students who miss assignments and classes.

Compounding this further is the fact that the instructors at UIC teach students at very different stages of their academic careers. In our 101 classes, 35% of the students were freshmen, compared to 25% who were sophomores and 25% who were juniors. The remaining 15% were seniors, graduate students, or non-degree students. Many of the students enrolled in the course to fulfill liberal arts electives requirement or to acquire the credits in political science required for Illinois teacher certification. Only a small percentage of students had declared majors in political science or an associated field in the social sciences.

With students at such different points in their studies, some will find the course a real challenge, struggling to keep up with the reading, lectures, and other class material. Other will view the course as overly simplistic and will give the course only a modicum of

effort. These differences affect the quality of the classroom environment by affecting the quality of the classroom discussions, group projects, and lectures.

The University of Illinois at Chicago has a very diverse student body, and this diversity was well represented in our classes. Among students in our 101 classes, 43.6% were white, 15% were Latino, 15% were Asian, 7.3% were African-American, and 3.2% were from the Middle East. 20.5% of our students were born outside the United States and 51.5% were first-generation Americans. Women outnumbered men in the class 58.2-40.5%, a ratio of nearly 3-2. The overwhelming majority of students were aged 22 or under (80.5%), though a sizable percentage was between age 23 and 29 (17.2) and a few were even over age 30 (2.3%).

For instructors, the diversity of the student body poses challenges related to the linguistic, cultural, and political differences of students. Language can be a barrier because many students may not understand English well, let alone the specialized vocabulary used in our political science course. Culturally, students may have widely divergent views about the use of political power, about authority, or about issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic classes. Students working on group projects struggled with the interpersonal dynamics of their group, whose members included students from Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia all together.

Politically, our students range broadly both in terms of partisanship and their ideological self-identification. Table 1 illustrates the partisan identification and self-described political ideology of our students at the start and end of the term. As the column figures illustrate, there were subtle shifts in several categories between the beginning and end of the semester, though the distribution continued to favor Democrats and liberals rather than

Republicans or Conservatives. This is expected, considering the age, education, and location within a heavily Democratic area.

Table 1: Partisanship and Political Ideology of Students

	Pretest (%)	Posttest (%)
Democrat	38.6	42.7
Republican	18.6	25.5
Independent/ Other	25.9	22.7
Don't Know/ No Answer	16.9	9.1
Liberal	34.5	38.2
Conservative	19.1	27.7
Moderate	25.9	24.1
Other/Don't Know	20.4	10

N=220

By the end of the term, students identifying with either political party had increased slightly more for the Republicans, though the plurality of students still identified themselves as Democrats. Nearly as many students identified themselves as independents or did not identify with either party. In terms of ideology, the number of students identifying themselves as conservatives had increased, while those identifying themselves as liberals or moderates had remained more stable. The fact that students identified more readily with a partisan label or with a particular ideology suggests that students may have gained an understanding and/or a confidence about themselves by the end of the term.

Among the students in our class, 44% of those who were able to register to vote in the last election had done so, a rate slightly less than the national average of 49% for persons aged 18-24 (U.S. Census, 1997). 23% of our students claimed to be too young to register, while 6% were not citizens. The remaining 22% had not registered at the time of the survey. Of those who had registered, 36.5% of those persons had voted in the 1996 elections, a figure slightly higher than the national average of 32% for voters aged 18-24. Male students voted at a higher rate than the national average (38.5% compared to 30%), while women

voted at the same rate (35.5% compared to 35%). Surprisingly, men voted at a much higher rate than women did a reverse of national trends.

Based on these demographic data, there are several things about our students worth noting. First, they represent very diverse ethnic and racial groups, and many were either born outside the United States or are among the first generation of their families to be born here. In terms of the cultural, linguistic, and social differences among students, this creates significant challenges for the instructors. Our students also carry numerous commitments outside of class, including work, family, and children. The students in our classes juggle Pols 101 with their other commitments. Instructors must pay extra care to keep these students interested and ensure that the course competes successfully for their time and attention. Finally, the students travel long distances to get to class. Commuting impacts on attendance, tardiness, and attentiveness, and saps valuable energy from the classroom. Among the factors affecting the course, we feel that this alone is the single factor, which deserves the greatest future scrutiny.

In our Pols 101 class, we took several steps to overcome some of the challenges posed by the distinct characteristics of our students. First, we tried to emphasize assignments to be done outside of class over in-class exercises or lectures and discussions. In addition, we posted class materials, including on-line practice exams, lecture notes, and class assignments, on the Internet and instructed students to check the site frequently. Both of these measures were designed to assist students who traveled the farthest distances or whose outside commitments presented serious burdens on their participation.

We tried contextualizing the course by having students learn about their local Congressional representative and relating what they learned in class about representation and election campaigns with what they learned through their independent research. Students

were asked to compile a profile of their representative and their district, and then to compare the types of issues that affected the district with the way that their representative acted in office and on the campaign trail. We also used this exercise as a way of introducing students to conducting research using Internet-based materials. Again, the intent was to teach students attenuated from the campus and its resources to link to research materials from home.

To stimulate class attendance and to make our lectures and discussions more useful, we tried to adjust the format of lectures and to provide interesting in-class simulations. Lectures were integrated with multimedia presentations including political video clips and sound bytes. Using a laptop computer and projector, we could take practically anything available on the Internet and incorporate it directly into the class lecture. Thus when speaking about a particular document, historical event, or a speech, we could splice pictures, video footage, or audio clips that would run simultaneously with the lecture.

Our in-class assignments included role-playing and debates designed to let students step into the shoes of members of Congress by attempting to pass legislation on several volatile issues. The legislative exercise proved to be very popular, according to student comments on semester evaluation forms. Most notably, students learned how to empathize with political leaders, and to understand why they did not or could not always deliver on promises made during campaigns or during heated policy debates.

The course was team-taught using We the People: An Introduction to American Politics (Ginsberg, et al, 1996). The format of the class included two 50-minute lectures and one 50-minute discussion per week, two 5-7-page papers, three multiple choice exams, as well as several short exercises assigned periodically throughout the term. One instructor taught the first seven weeks of the course, while the other instructor taught the last eight

weeks of the course. The emphasis of the course was on exploring the structure and processes of the American political system. The course material was divided into three parts, with the first part presenting the underlying political history and philosophy of American government, the second part devoted to federal political institutions, and the third section devoted to the study of processes and politics. Throughout the course, special attention was paid to the relationship between the individual and the government.

Section 2: The Research Design

To assess the impact of our introductory political science course, we evaluated data on several key variables including political interest, political alienation, political knowledge, and confidence in governmental institutions. The data had been collected by a professor at the university to help him evaluate the course using questions drawn from past NES surveys[1]. The variables were measured using a pre-test/post-test model (Campbell and Stanley, 1963), though unfortunately a control group was not measured simultaneously.

The first survey was administered on the first day of classes, prior to any lecture or discussion of politics. The second survey was administered on the last day of classes, after fifteen weeks of instruction. The change in responses from the first to last day of class represents the impact of the course on students' opinions. All survey questions contained closed-ended multiple-choice responses

To measure *political interest,* students were asked a proxy question concerning the extent that they followed "what's going on in government and public affairs." Responses included "hardly at all," "only now and then," "some of the time," and "most of the time."

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1 We wish to thank Professor Gerald Strom of the University of Illinois at Chicago for use of the data he collected.

We measured *political alienation* using seven questions where students were asked to agree, disagree with a given statement about politics. Respondents were also given the opportunity to answer "don't know." The individual questions measured alienation towards public officials, Congress, political parties, national and local elections, and voting. Each statement professed a sentiment of alienation. When coding responses, we treated agreement responses as the strongest indication of alienation, followed by the "don't know" responses, and followed by those who disagreed with the statement. "Agree" responses were coded a 2, "Not sure"/ "don't know" responses were coded a 1, and "Disagree" responses were coded a 0. We then aggregated each individual's answers to create an Alienation Index Score (ASI), whose values ranged from 0-14. Those who disagreed with all would score 0, while those who agreed with all statements would score a 14. As scores increased from 0, the degree of alienation increased.

To measure *political knowledge*, students were asked: 1) who controlled the U.S. House; 2) the number of U.S. Senators; 3) the party affiliation of a particular Senator; and 4) the party affiliation of Illinois' governor. On questions concerning partisanship, students had the choice of "Democrat", "Republican", or "Don't Know." On the size of the Senate question, students could choose one of four answers. When coding responses, we created dichotomous variables where correct responses were coded as 2 and all other responses were coded as 1. The four questions were then summed to create a Political Knowledge Index (PKI) whose values ranged from 4 to 8. Those who answered all answers correctly scored an 8, while those answered all questions incorrectly scored a 0. Student's who answered "Don't Know" were coded as incorrect.

Lastly, we measured the students' confidence in the American political system. Four questions were asked that assessed the degree that respondents believed that the government

pays attention to what people think, that political parties influence government action, that elections matter, and that those elected to Congress pay attention to the people who elected them when making decisions. To each of the four questions, respondents could have answered "not much," "some," or "a good deal." Since we perceived those students who answered "a good deal" as having greater confidence, we coded their responses a 3, while those with less confidence were rated a 2 or a 1, respectively. Each student's four responses were then indexed to make a Confidence Index (CI), whose values ranged, from four to twelve. Those that scored four were viewed as having little confidence in the political system and process, while those that scored twelve were viewed as being very confident.

On each of the variables, we compared the values from the first and second surveys to assess what, if any change occurred, following a simple pretest/posttest experimental research design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) where the course itself was viewed as the experimental treatment. Clearly, this design cannot be treated as overly precise, as there are a variety of intervening variables that were not measured yet which could have been important. Two notable variables not originally measured include attention to media or amount of time spent on the course. Instead, we have developed a basic model for measuring broad changes in students' opinions as a result of haven taken our class in American Government. In future research, we intend to build on these results and to further specify the model.

Section 3: The Results

After the 15-week course, we found that student opinions on each of the variables had improved, suggesting that the course had a positive impact on students' attitudes toward politics and government. Table 2 illustrates the changes in our variables from pretest to

posttest, using a paired-samples means test. This test will determine whether or not the difference in means of two related samples is 0 (null hypothesis), or if they differ significantly.

Table 2 : Means of Student Opinions on First and Second Student Surveys

Variable	Change in Mean	Pretest	Posttest	T-statistic
Interest in Politics	0.20	2.67	2.87	3.84 ***
Political Alienation (ASI)	-0.53	5.18	4.65	2.70 ***
Political Knowledge (PKI)	0.67	5.99	6.66	8.57 ***
Confidence in Political System (CI)	0.71	8.19	8.90	5.36 ***

*** Denotes significance at .99 confidence level

As the table illustrates, each of the variables underwent significant change from the first survey to the second survey. Based on these data, we conclude that the course impacted student interest in politics, alienation from politics, political knowledge, and students' confidence in the political system. Based on these results, we would expect that these students will be more likely to participate in political activities in the future and will be more likely to view politics and government positively. For persons seeking evidence that civic education is valuable, these data are perhaps the best supporting evidence. In the following pages, we explore each of these variables further.

Political Interest:

Students' expressed higher levels of political interest by the end of the term, though the changes represent a shift from moderate interest to high interest, rather than a shift from low interest to high. Students who followed politics and government "some of the time" had increased from 59.8% of the students to 72.7%. Figure 2 illustrates the shift in student responses.

(Insert Figure 2 here)

As political scientists and educators, we are most concerned with those students who remain least interested in politics, even after taking a course on American government and politics. There were 10 students (4.5%) who said they paid attention to politics and government "hardly at all" and another 50 (22.7%) who said they paid attention "only now and then." Whether this reflects low esteem for media coverage, genuine disinterest in political affairs, or some other variable cannot be ascertained from our data. We did find that Latino students, students from the Middle East, and students born outside this country seemed to be slightly less attentive than others are. This would seem logical in that language and cultural differences may make following public affairs more difficult for these students. In addition, these students may be responding to the question about attentiveness within the context of the American government course. Had they been asked if they follow the politics and government affairs in their home countries, their responses might have been very different. We also caution against making too much of these findings because they were drawn from a small sample of students.

Despite these caveats, we believe that the fact that 27.3% of students who had just completed a political science course intended to stimulate their interest in politics remained largely unstimulated is clear and disturbing. If these figures are representative of other colleges and universities, then instructors not only need to be aware of this problem, but need to take steps to rectify it within their courses. We will want to continue to focus attention in the future on teaching students to appreciate the role of government and public affairs in their lives and to encourage them to pay attention to politics and government affairs. It is quite possible that students currently view politics and public affairs as something to observe for class purposes, but not necessarily for their own benefit independent of the class. Normatively, we believe political science courses should be interesting and should stimulate interest in politics. We do not suggest that students should adopt a positive or negative view, however, but rather that they should view monitoring government and politics as important.

Political Alienation

Alienation also declined among our students, based on responses to the pretest and posttest. Recall that student responses were coded from one to three, and then indexed to create an index value whose range was 0-14. The lower the overall value, the lower the alienation expressed by the student. Students' alienation on the pretest was moderate, with a

mean of 5.18 and standard deviation of 2.42. On the posttest, alienation had decreased, with the mean response 4.65 and standard deviation of 2.79. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of students' indexed responses.

(Insert Figure 3 Here)

As Figure 3 illustrates, the distribution of student alienation tended to shift away from the extremes towards the moderate position. The number of students professing little alienation by the end of the term increased from 23.7% of students to 37.7%, an increase of 14 percentage points. The number of students who felt very alienated stayed roughly equal, with 4.1% professing high levels of alienation on pretest and posttest. The mean change in alienation was -.56, with 66% of the students change their indexed answers between +2 and −2 values.

Overall, 49.8% of students felt less alienated by the end of the term, 15.8% expressed the same level of alienation at the end as at the beginning (no change), and 23.8% of students expressed moderately increased alienation by the end of the term. Based on their posttest responses, we found that these same students were slightly less interested in politics and slightly less confident that the political system was working as it should according to democratic theory, when compared to students who were less alienated.

What we conclude from the survey question responses on alienation was that the class served to decrease alienation for most students. This is a logical conclusion and fits with how we expected students to react to the course. In our class, we tried to present American government in a way that is approachable and comfortable. A significant amount of time was devoted to explaining simple facts and to illustrating connections between the students, their government representatives, and government agencies. We wanted students to come away feeling that they better understood how their government operated. More importantly, we wanted them to have developed a sense of proprietorship towards the federal government. Based on responses drawn from student evaluations, we feel that our course accomplished these objectives and that particular exercises, including the legislative simulation and the Congressional representative research assignment, were especially useful in connecting students with their government and government representatives.

Political Knowledge

Political knowledge also increased by the end of the term. First, we found that student responses to knowledge questions remained consistent. Approximately two-thirds

of the students did not change their responses to the knowledge questions from the pretest to the posttest. This is not too disconcerting concerning the students who answered the questions correctly the first time. What is disconcerting is the number of students who answered questions incorrectly on both the pretest and the posttest. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of correct and incorrect student responses to each of the four knowledge questions on the pretest and posttest.

Table 3: Political Knowledge Change by Question

	Correct Pretest	Correct Posttest	Correct Both	Incorrect Both	Correct→ Incorrect	Incorrect→ Correct
Question 1	54.5	60.3	49.7% (107)	33.9% (73)	5.1% (11)	11.2% (24)
Question 2	29.5	49.7	26.5% (57)	46% (99)	3.7% (8)	23.7% (51)
Question 3	47.7	75.8	41.4% (89)	17.2% (37)	6.5% (14)	34.9% (75)
Question 4	67.7	80.4	59.5% (128)	10.2% (22)	8.8% (19)	21.4% (46)

N=215

Question 1 asked students to identify the party of the Illinois governor, who was a second-term Republican. As the table illustrates, there was only a slight change in student responses, which is to be expected since our course dealt little with state politics or state government. Students likely knew which party the governor was independently of the course. Question 2 asked students to identify the party of Dick Durbin, who had been recently elected as the junior U.S. Senator from Illinois in a race that received quite a bit of attention in the media. While there was a considerable increase in the number of students who could correctly associate Durbin with his party, less than half answered the question correctly by the end of the term. Given that there were only two choices for the correct answer, we cannot feel that we accomplished the objective of teaching students the correct answer to this question. Probability alone gives them a 50% chance of answering correct.

Students' responses improved significantly on the third question, which asked students to name the party currently controlling the U.S. House of Representatives. On this question, nearly 35% of students correctly switched their answers from pretest to posttest. Question 4 asked students to name the number of senators in the U.S. Senate, and not surprisingly high percentages of students answered this question correctly on the pretest and the posttest. Given that this course dealt with structural aspects of American national government, these results are not too surprising. In sum, these data suggest that the course achieved the overall political knowledge of students.

Confidence in Political System

When we examined students' confidence in the political system, we found that confidence slightly increased. We asked students four questions concerning their confidence in basic processes of American politics. As with other questions, student responses were coded and then indexed to create a composite value of political confidence. Values on the index ranged from four to twelve, where scores from four to six suggested "little" confidence, scores from seven to nine suggested "moderate" confidence and scores from ten to twelve suggested "great" confidence.

(Insert Figure 5 here)

Student responses on both pretest and posttest suggest that students have a high degree of confidence in the American political system. The mean of the indexed responses increased by .71, which was statistically significant. In general, individual student responses shifted one or two positions positively or negatively, as figure 6 illustrates, though for the most part, responses remained consistent from the pretest to the posttest.

(Insert Figure 6 here)

These data suggest that students feel generally positive about the processes and institutions of American government, but that the course reinforces and strengthens those positive feelings.

Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The data we have collected are rough and exploratory, but they strongly suggest that the political science course had a very positive impact on the variables we measured. Clearly, our course helped to improve students' interest in politics decreased political alienation, increased political knowledge and confidence in the American political system. As we suggested earlier, it is likely that the course reinforced positive attitudes, rather than reversed negative attitudes held at the start of the course. Just the same, we feel that these data present positive empirical support for the course as a tool for improving civic education.

This research should be considered exploratory, yet it underscores the importance of empirical evidence on the impact of political science courses on actual opinions and attitudes towards politics and political participation. As we mentioned at the start, political science instructors bear an increasing share of the responsibility for providing young voters the basics of American government and politics. Irrespective of attempts of being a value-

neutral enterprise, political science is responsible for civic education in the United States. Such responsibility is hindered when there is little or no empirical evidence supporting certain teaching strategies over others, and when there is no data with which to establish a baseline for comparing student opinions before and after taking political science courses. Towards that end, we have undertaken this research.

Our research suggests that teaching in an urban environment presents challenges. Included in these are the problems created when students commute long distances, when students work long hours outside of school, and when students must balance family obligations with classroom responsibilities. Students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds may also require special attention, especially when faced with lecture-based courses and technical jargon. Schools where there is a high rate of student mobility may need to take special efforts to indoctrinate incoming students as to the ways of the university, and where special programs do not exist, these responsibilities will fall to the instructors within the classroom.

As instructors, we can improve our effectiveness by using multimedia in the classroom, including greater emphasis on visual presentations. With current technology, instructors can easily incorporate video and sound into traditional lectures, even to the point of using computer-based presentations to seamlessly integrate different media within lectures. We use Microsoft PowerPoint and an LCD projector to accomplish this. We use the Internet in our class, requiring students to search for information about class subjects on the Web and by posting class materials such as practice exams on a class web site. In our most recent class, we are using electronic discussion groups to promote discussions between students about current topics related to issues discussed in the class. Since the online discussions are monitored and included as part of student participation, students feel strongly encouraged to participate and to use the discussion site constructively. Recent tallies of postings suggest that nearly all students participate in the electronic discussion group, many posting messages at least three times a week (exceeding classroom requirements by fifty percent). As one would expect, the online practice exams also generated thousands of visits by students per month.

Our inquiry suffers from certain limitations, which we hope to address in future research. First, we need a more thorough measure of each of the variables discussed in this study. We would like to have more questions, incorporating a greater diversity of responses,

and having greater coordination with the issues and materials discussed in the course. We relied in this study on data collected by another 101 instructor for a completely different purpose, and the limitations of using someone else's data were painfully obvious throughout this project. Second, we would like to have more data on the extraneous factors that might have affected the variables we measured. Most notably, we need measures of the types of information sources used by students outside of class, such as media, friends, or family. We also need to measure student involvement in the course, including attendance and use of class resources, such as online information, office visits, or study sessions. We had no measure of the intensity with which students participated in the course, and thus could only make broad generalizations from the data collected. Finally, we would like to have correlations between grades and student opinions. It would be useful to know the correlation between academic performance and opinions about civic participation, politics, and government.

In conclusion, we feel strongly that this exploratory research has improved the body of knowledge concerning student opinions toward politics and the degree to which political science courses can improve civic engagement. We are confident that this study will stimulate future research that will address the shortcomings of this research. Hopefully, we have contributed to the ongoing effort to improve the teaching of political science.

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Appendix: Accompanying Figures

Figure 1: Interest in Politics

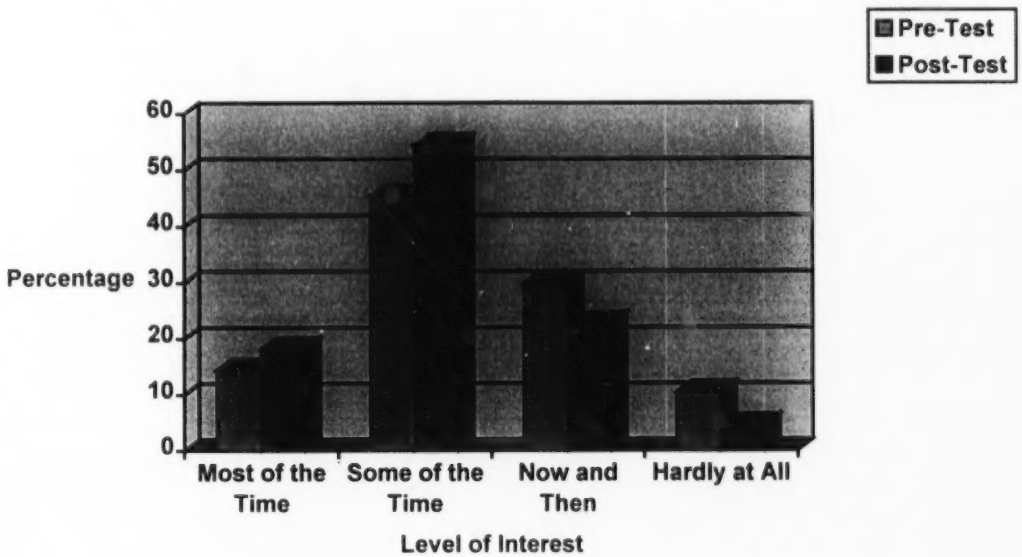

Figure 2: Shifts in Interests in Politics

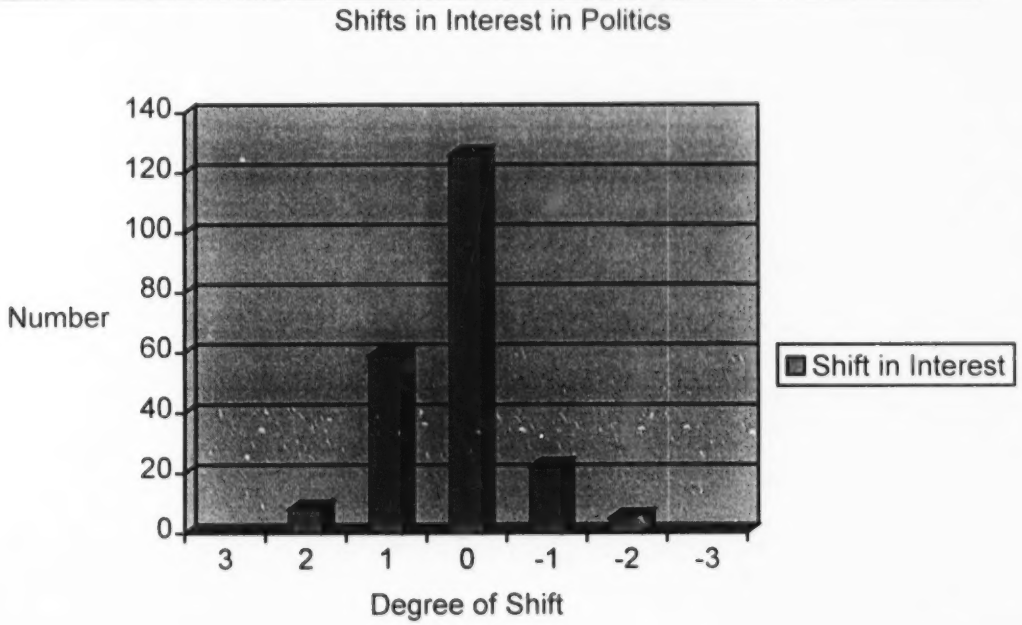

Figure 3: Political Alienation

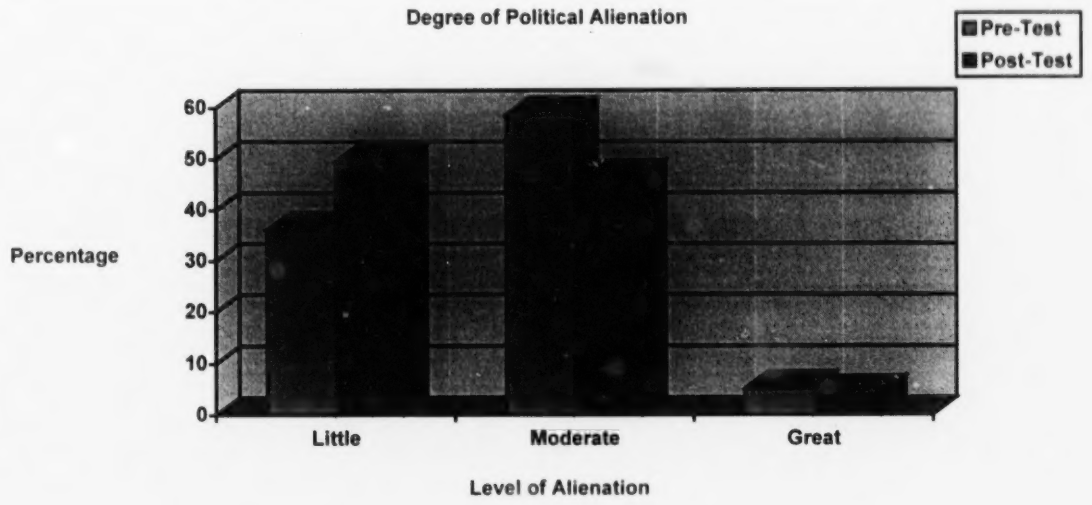

Figure 4: Political Knowledge

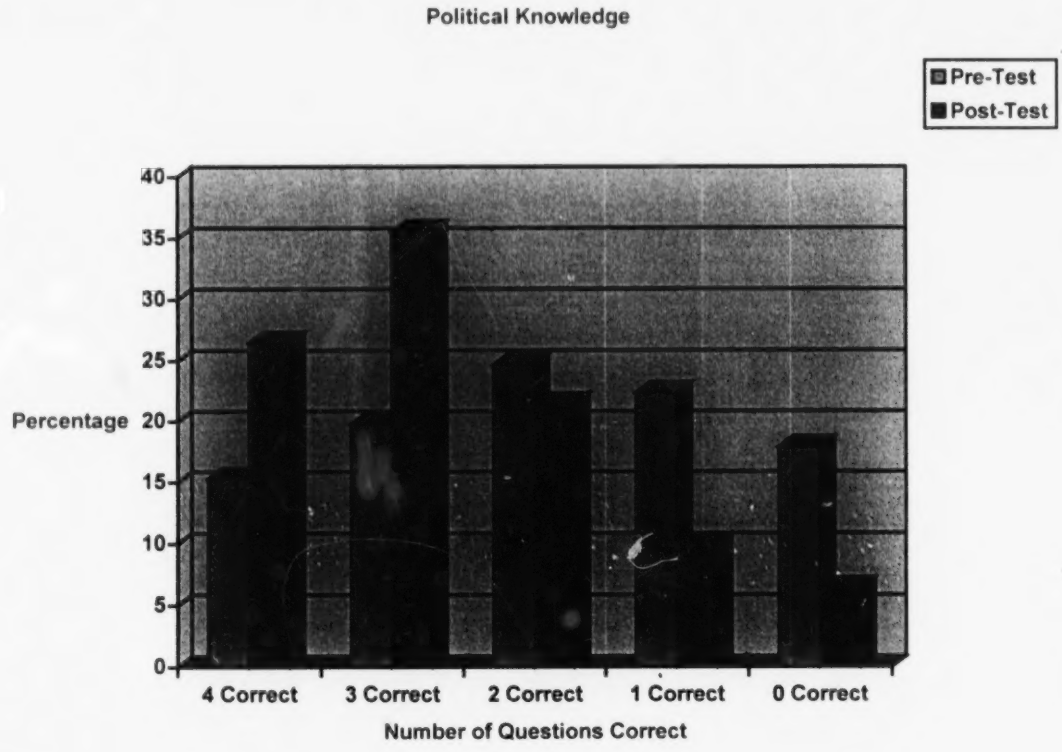

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Figure 5: Political Confidence

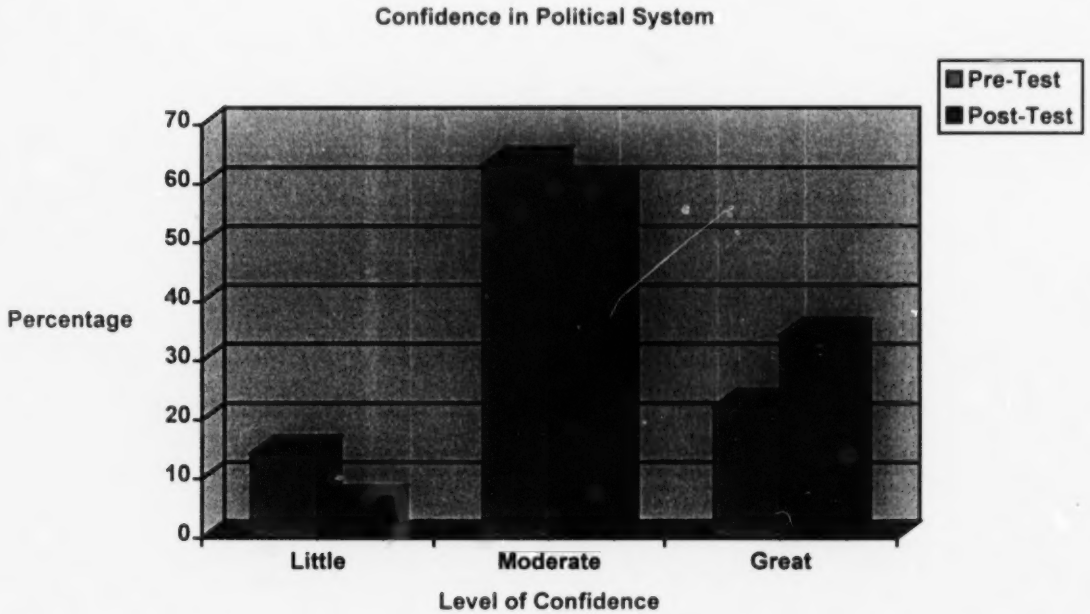

Figure 6: Degree of Change in Political Confidence